



SeaWorld Orlando's new attraction, Manta, spins, skims and flies like a giant ray.

Orlando in a Hurry

Tips on making the most of a speedy theme-park vacation

BY RONA GINDIN

YOU HAVE THREE DAYS, some comfy shoes and the stamina to delve into Orlando's theme parks. It's a lovely plan—until you realize you'll have to choose from a slew of magical kingdoms, each of which can easily entertain your troupe for more than a full action-packed day. Here's how to take in as much as possible during one long weekend.

TIME IT WISELY

You'll have a blast even if you visit Orlando during Spring Break. But at this time of year in general, you might only make it onto six attractions—even if you dash around from the moment you finish your character breakfast until the after-dark fireworks shoot into the sky. You'll need to rise early so you can enter the parks

as the gates open. Aim for 9 a.m. at the latest—crowds build as the day goes on. You can keep a virtual eye on wait times by downloading a smartphone app like Universal Orlando Wait Times. (Note: As a special perk for those staying at selected *Walt Disney World*® Resort Hotels, every day one of the Theme Parks offers the *Extra Magic Hours* benefit—extended hours just for guests.)

MAP OUT A PLAN

Josh is dying to see Universal's Hogwarts Castle and try its Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey ride, Madison wants to zip through kiddie literature on The Cat in the Hat, and you're eager to watch the talented tricksters at the Eighth Voyage of Sinbad Stunt Show. Choose one "must"

apiece—no more. Not only are the theme parks large (which means long walks between attractions) and apt to have lines; they're also filled with unexpected wonders. As you stroll around, you'll see musicians, storytellers and characters signing autographs and posing for photos. Why rush through? If you each get your No. 1 pick, you'll all leave satisfied. But promise the kids more and then don't deliver, and they might leave disappointed.

Even if your itinerary includes all thrill rides, live shows or character encounters, consult a map and the park's daily schedule (available near the entrance) before you embark on the day's journey. Don't hustle from one end of a park to the other and back again when you can take on your top picks in geographic order.



Close encounters with rays at SeaWorld's Manta exhibit. Right: Disney's BoardWalk Villas. Below: The monorail at Epcot®.



BYPASS THE LINES

Some rides at the *Walt Disney World*® Resort, like *Soarin*™ at *Epcot*®, are so popular that the only way to avoid a long wait is by using the free *Fastpass*® Service. You simply insert your tickets in a machine outside the desired attraction and get them back with a time window indicating when to return to enter without waiting in line. Only the most popular rides have this option. Universal's version is the Express Plus Pass (from \$20), which lets you walk straight onto most attractions once during the course of a day. SeaWorld has a similar offering called QuickQueue (from \$15).

EAT AT ODD TIMES

We all tend to crave food between noon and 2 p.m. And that means your stop for cheeseburgers and veggie wraps can take a grueling 45 minutes—and more shuffling feet in long lines. Instead, fuel up at breakfast, snack on popcorn at 10:30 a.m. and then share an oversized turkey

leg while you wait for an afternoon parade to start. That'll buy you more time to do the activities less mundane than eating.

Another option is to make some lunch sandwiches at your resort and eat them on a bench when hunger strikes. For dinner, choose a restaurant that accepts reservations and lock in your seats. Avoid the chain restaurants just outside the parks that don't take reservations—they usually have crowds waiting for tables from 6 p.m. on.



WAIT OUT THE PARADE

Orlando's theme-park parades are always joyful and uplifting, and hordes of visitors gather to watch the floats pass by. But as soon as the parades end, usually in mid afternoon, throngs of people head for the exits, so stick around.

TRAVEL SMART

Universal's parking lot often has a long morning wait to enter, so its shuttles and water taxis might be the way to go if you're staying at one of three on-site Loews. But the parks and resorts that are part of the *Walt Disney World*® Resort are spread out, and its shuttles run on a time-consuming hub-and-spoke system. The best way to save time is by staying in a resort near the theme park you plan to focus on. (For example, the *Magic Kingdom*® Park and *Epcot*® are easily reached via monorail from three hotels, and the Renaissance Orlando at SeaWorld is essentially just across the street.) Or you can rent a car and drive yourself around.

ORLANDO



SeaWorld's Journey to Atlantis water coaster. Right: The Incredible Hulk roller coaster at Universal Studios.



DO THE BUSYWORK AT HOME

Why spend even an extra minute waiting to buy tickets when you can be strolling through gardens, zooming around on roller coasters and hugging comic-book heroes? All it takes is a computer and/or a phone at home to rent your car, reserve your room, book your dinner tables and buy your theme park tickets. You can even pre-arrange to have your daughters transformed into little princesses at the *Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique*, and to take backstage tours, dive with sharks, splurge on a character breakfast and more—before you hit the city.

BUT BUY THE RIGHT TICKETS

Single-day, multi-day, single-park, multi-park—there's a multitude of options when you're buying theme park tickets. One thing you need to keep in mind: Admissions are discounted when you pay for more than one day at a time. Just be sure you're getting what you want. For example, if your plan is to participate in the American Idol Experience at *Disney's Hollywood Studios™* by day and later dine at the tony *Bistro de Paris* at *Epcot®*, check that your ticket will

allow you to “park hop.” And be aware that when you buy tickets for SeaWorld, you can add on discounted days at its nearby Aquatica waterpark—and even at Busch Gardens in Tampa, 90 minutes away.

BYOS

Need a stroller or wheelchair? Bring your own, since rental lines can be lengthy in the morning. Plus, the rental strollers at any given park are all identical, so you might waste 15 minutes searching through a field of clones after exiting each adventure. By contrast, your own Maclaren or Graco will stand out. If you do choose to rent, tie a brightly colored ribbon onto the handlebar to make your carriage easy to spot.

Follow these tips and you'll be able to pack a load of experiences into a trio of 12-hour days. And if that sounds exhausting, feel free to just meander over to a megapark whenever you feel like it, or simply to spend the afternoon by the resort pool and have a leisurely dinner while enjoying the warm spring weather. There's no wrong way to enjoy Orlando's theme parks.

STAY

RCI affiliated resorts in and around Orlando include:



DISNEY'S BOARDWALK VILLAS

Designed to feel like a 1940s Mid-Atlantic beach town, this resort has one- to three-bedroom units, multiple pools and a lively boardwalk with restaurants and entertainment. Within walking distance or a short ride to several theme parks. *2101 N. Epcot Resorts Blvd., Lake Buena Vista*

Member Reviews:

“Steps from the World Showcase gate at *Epcot®*, and across the street from *Disney's Hollywood Studios™*.”
“I took *Disney's Magical Express®* Transportation to the resort and used their shuttle services all week with no problems.”

SHERATON VISTANA RESORT

Set on 135 lush acres, with an 18-hole miniature-golf course, 13 tennis courts, seven pools, seven hot tubs, six recreation centers and a full-service restaurant. *8800 Vistana Centre Dr., Orlando*



Member Reviews:

“Several pools on the property and a jam-packed activity schedule.”
 “Big-screen TV, granite countertops and new cabinets; close to the pool and clay tennis courts.”

ORLANDO INTERNATIONAL RESORT CLUB

This centrally located resort has gas barbecues, a heated pool, a tennis court, a basketball court and a fitness center. The I-Ride Trolley stops here for an easy shuttle to many nearby attractions. *5353 Del Verde Way, Orlando*

Member Reviews:

“The screened balcony with ceiling fan is a massive bonus.”
 “Free equipment for tennis, shuffleboard and basketball. Even board games to take to your unit.”



VACATION VILLAGE AT PARKWAY

Twenty miles south of Orlando, these one- and two-bedroom units are just a mile from the *Walt Disney World®* Resort and a short drive to other entertainment. On-site pools and hot tub. *2949 Arabian Nights Blvd., Kissimmee*

Member Reviews:

“Nature walks on a wooden pier/bridge through the woods.”

“New, well-kept building and grounds.”
 “Whenever we are in the Orlando area on vacation, we will always make Parkway our first choice of vacation resorts.”

WYNDHAM CYPRESS PALMS

This Kissimmee resort has two pools, gas grills, a hot tub and an activity center. Many theme parks and attractions are just a 20-minute drive away. *5324 Fairfield Lake Dr., Kissimmee*

Member Reviews:

“An ideal place to relax and just enjoy the Florida sunshine.”
 “Our teen grandchildren found the activity center great.”
 “Small resort, which made everything easily accessible.”



HOLIDAY INN CLUB VACATIONS AT ORANGE LAKE RESORT—WEST VILLAGE

Just five miles from the *Walt Disney World®* Resort, this 1,450-acre resort has seven pools, an 80-acre lake and a 1,200-foot-long lazy river. The West Village area has golf courses and a beach club. *8505 W. Irlo Bronson Memorial Hwy., Kissimmee*

Member Reviews:

“The grounds were well maintained with a tropical appeal.”
 “Legends restaurant was outstanding—probably the best food we had in Orlando.”

For more information, including complete member reviews (as member reviews have been condensed), visit RCI.com or call 800-338-7777 (Weeks) or 877-968-7476 (Points). Club Members, please call your specific Club or RCI telephone number.

NON-RCI AFFILIATED RESORTS:



HYATT REGENCY GRAND CYPRESS

This newly renovated 815-room resort has 45 holes of golf, a 21-acre lake and a lagoon swimming pool with waterslides. The Sunday brunch is legendary. *1 Grand Cypress Blvd., Orlando; 407-239-1234; hyatt.com; doubles from \$186 per night*

HARD ROCK HOTEL AT UNIVERSAL ORLANDO

A 650-room property with a 12,000-square-foot pool (and a 260-foot water-slide). *5800 Universal Blvd., Orlando; 888-430-4999; loewshotels.com; doubles from \$239 per night*




ROSEN SHINGLE CREEK

A grand hotel set on 230 acres near all of Orlando's attractions. *9939 Universal Blvd., Orlando; 866-996-9939; rosenshinglecreek.com; doubles from \$285 per night*

GAYLORD PALMS

Perfect for families—just 1½ miles from the gates of the *Walt Disney World®* Resort. *6000 W. Osceola Pkwy., Kissimmee; 407-586-2000; gaylordhotels.com; doubles from \$269 per night*

BOHEMIAN HOTEL CELEBRATION

Set on a man-made lake, minutes from the theme parks. *700 Bloom St., Celebration; 888-249-4007; celebrationhotel.com; doubles from \$179 per night* 

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